

Sermon October 9, 2022

*What Would Mister Rogers Do?*

In May of 1969, there was a hearing on the funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The entity that brings us important programming as Masterpiece Theater, Austin City Limits, Sesame Street, and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. President Nixon was looking for additional funding in the federal budget for the Vietnam War and wanted to cut the funding for public broadcasting in half.

Fred Rogers, also known as Mister Rogers, spoke before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications. The Senator who chaired the committee hearing, Senator John Pastore, had no idea who Mr. Rogers was and did not know anything about his program. He started the conversation with Mr. Rogers with a gruff, "Alright Rogers, you have the floor." Mr. Rogers elected not to read his prepared statement, but instead spoke from his heart about why programs such as his were important for the development of children.

He told the Committee:

I end the program by saying, "You've made this day a special day, by just your being you. There's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you, just the way you are." [He added] And I feel that if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health."

He then does something unusual, he tells the Committee about a song he sings on the show. He tells them this song is for children when they feel out of control. He says,

And it starts out, "What do you do with the mad that you feel?" He says that first line came straight from a child."

The song ends with:

*'I can stop when I want to. Can stop when I wish. Can stop, stop, stop anytime....And what a good feeling to feel like this! And know that the feeling is really mine. Know that there's something deep inside that helps us become what we can.'*

Senator Pastore responded with, "I think it's wonderful. I think it's wonderful. Looks like you just earned the 20 million dollars."

I watch this clip on YouTube a lot. Especially when I need a pick me up. I used to be a legislative liaison (basically a lobbyist) for state agencies at the Capitol in Oklahoma and I sat through numerous committee hearings, many of which were about children and their safety and general welfare, and I never saw anyone approach legislators like this.

I think most of us in Mister Rogers' shoes would come in armed with facts and figures and try to justify our program's existence by appealing to people's logic, and purportedly that is what most of the people testifying for the two days before Mister Rogers did.

But Mister Rogers understood something about people that can be easy to miss, that so often it is not our logic that needs to be appealed to. It is our hearts, it is our sense of kindness, and compassion. I once heard someone refer to Mister Rogers as a Genius of Empathy and I think that is true, but I think his most important role was not just being an empathetic person but teaching us how to be empathetic and how to bravely and boldly express our empathy for others.

His testimony that day and his life in general...was daring. To look into the eyes of the world, that often is trying so hard to be cynical or cool or removed from emotion and say, "I care. And, I see you and I like you just the way you are."

Just the simple act of being willing to put yourself out there and show the world that you are choosing kindness and love can be risky.

I have a six-year-old son and I am already worried about the ways in which the world will teach him to be less of the kind and sensitive soul that he is. I see the way young children are already hiding away little bits of themselves, and how difficult it is for them when they are told to stop crying or toughen up.

Growing up, we are often told our emotions are something to be locked away, to be embarrassed by. How many of us kick ourselves when we show our feelings in high-stress situations?

Mister Rogers tried to show many of us as children that there is an alternative choice to this need to be tough or cool. He taught us that we don't need to hold our emotions back or that our feelings are something to be acknowledged and respected.

Since he passed away, many in the media have lamented that there are no successors to Mister Rogers. I think that is likely true for t.v. and other forms of media, but what about every day life? Are we those successors? If not, can we be?

I don't know if you all remember those bracelets that got popular a decade or more ago (more like two decades ago): WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? I often think, I wish I had a WWMRD bracelet? What Would Mister Rogers Do? Not necessarily because it is a mystery to me what he would do, because we have decades worth of shows to tell us, but rather, because I need to remind myself of what it means to view the world through his lens of caring and consideration.

Mister Rogers once said, "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like *struggle*. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she

is, right here and now.”<sup>1</sup> That can sound simple but I think it is a tall order. I’m sure for many of us to actively love and accept people exactly for who they are in this moment and without a requirement for change can feel almost impossible at times. It feels like a completely unattainable goal, the work of a saint even.

Yet, many of the people in Mister Rogers life have said time and again that he was not a saint. He worked at being kind, at being a friend and good neighbor unlike anyone they had met before. Mister Rogers once said in a commencement speech, “We don’t always succeed in what we try, certainly not by the world’s standards, but I think that you’ll find that it is the willingness to keep trying that matters most.” He understood the value of identifying who or what we want to be and trying to live into our better self.

Mister Rogers did not think the true striving for our better self should be centered around money or titles or awards either. But, he said, “It is the knowing that we can be trusted, that the bedrock of our very being is good stuff, that we never have to fear the truth...”<sup>2</sup>

He said, “When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember* by Fred Rogers

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfkSGe9wuwQ>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/5/23/15681060/celebrating-mister-rogers-google-doodle-anniversary-quotes>

What is incredible is not only that he identified these intangible gifts that live inside all of us but that he appeared to live his life in search of advocating for and nurturing their importance not only in himself but in others as well.

And what is remarkable about this to me is that he didn't have to.

Mister Rogers was born into a very wealthy family outside of Pittsburgh, in the blue collar town of Latrobe. He was driven to school in a limo every day in elementary school, and many of the local kids were not allowed to come to his home for playdates because their families worried they wouldn't have nice enough clothes. He tells a story that one day, his chauffeur did not show up and he decided to walk home and was chased by a group of boys who called him "Fat Freddy." Likely due to the nature of his family's status in town, Mister Rogers had difficulty making friends in school as a result, he often spent much of his time alone with only his imagination to keep him company.

Many people who grew up like Mister Rogers might have lacked empathy for those who were not born in such fortunate circumstances. Have you heard the expression, born on third plate and think they scored a home run? It would have been easy for him to think his privilege was somehow blessed by God and therefore made him less sympathetic with others. Still others who grew up bullied and feeling lonely and outcast, could have become angry or bitter, he could have turned inward and brought his rage to bear on our culture as some often do. But he didn't.

He chose kindness and he chose it in the most radical way possible – to see the goodness in everyone and to not be afraid of expressing his feelings and his care for others. This is a revolutionary, and unusual, way for a man to comport himself now

much less in the 50s and 60s when he began working in television. And I don't think the world quite knew what to do with him then and I still don't think they know what to do with him now.

Even as a small child, I got the message loud and clear that Mister Rogers and his brand were deeply uncool and something to be made fun of. From Eddie Murphy's Mister Robinson's Neighborhood parody on Saturday Night Live or Johnny Carson's satire of his show. Popular culture told many of us who grew up in the Neighborhood that what we had been taught as young children was something to scoff at or distance ourselves from because what he was talking about was inherently uncool.

In addition to parodying Mister Rogers and making fun of his message, still others only took his message as surface level or dismissed his ideas of kindness, and particularly the consideration and respect for children and their emotions, as easy or shallow. But his kindness was born of faith and love and a deep commitment to seeing the divine in all people. Mister Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister who saw his role in television as his ministry.

His friend, Aaron Bisno, a rabbi at a temple in Pittsburg near where Mister Rogers filmed his show, said that Mister Rogers wondered "if heaven is the relationships we make here?" And, "Rather than waiting for a world that we might one day inherit or merit, we have an opportunity and a few number of years while we're with each other to make of this world, the world of which we speak and dream."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Finding Fred podcast, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/finding-fred/id1603260760>

Mister Rogers believed we make this a better world by accepting people, even in their brokenness,<sup>5</sup> and that starts with caring for and protecting the most vulnerable people in our lives – children. But, it also entails seeing the child within each of the people we encounter every day.

His close friend, Reverend George Wirth recounted that he was once talking about a difficult person from his congregation that he felt was trying to oust him from the church and Mister Rogers responded, “I wonder what happened to that man as a child that has caused him to be so angry and so determined to hurt you? I wonder what pain that man suffered when he was a child?”<sup>6</sup>

Honestly, as Mister Rogers’ friend, I might have been annoyed if he said that to me in the moment. I would have thought, but you are not understanding me. You are not seeing the detrimental impact this person is having on my life, but I am not sure that’s true. Maybe he did see it, but he also saw the harmful impact that person’s childhood or experiences had on them. By having empathy for another person, Mister Rogers is not asking us to not have empathy or boundaries for ourselves but to measure it. Maybe we can have both things? Maybe we can be hurt and frustrated by someone but also recognize their humanity, see them through a lens of empathy.

Since I have become a mother, and have a front row seat to the innocence and sweetness of childhood on a daily basis, I have started to look at people as the child they might have once been. It is sometimes almost too much to bear when you see the person on the news who is full of hatred or who has done something seemingly

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<sup>5</sup> Finding Fred podcast, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/finding-fred/id1603260760>

<sup>6</sup> Finding Fred podcast, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/finding-fred/id1603260760>

unforgiveable. But, I can't help but picture, even people who have hurt me personally, as a young child, their eyes full of innocence and the promise of who they wanted to be in the future. I mourn for the children and later adults who were abused or neglected, or who were told they wouldn't measure up or that their feelings weren't valid. All the ways the world has told us that the core of who we are wasn't enough.

The genius of Mister Rogers is that he seemed to see through that and never forgot, that for him, he was looking at a child of God, or to align with our UU values, he saw the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Yes, he remembered what it was to be a child, but, more importantly, he remembered that we were all children once and that if we could have been treated with the care we deserved, maybe the world would be different.

Mister Rogers once said, "Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like if each of us offered. As a matter of course. Just one kind word to another person."

Imagine if we went about our daily lives daring to say the complimentary word, daring to let people know what we were feeling and we said to them, "It's you I like."

I think that is what Mister Rogers would do and what he has been asking us, as his neighbors, to do all along.

Blessed be.

